

The Secret Museum at Kubinka:

This Russian museum's armor collection
Includes most of Nazi Germany's WWII tanks
And even some U.S.-made Cold War "defectors"

by James M. Warford

In 1936, a secret Russian armored vehicle testing facility was established at Kubinka, a large site approximately 60 kms west of Moscow. Over the years, this facility has been used for the testing of both new armored vehicle designs intended for the Russian Army, as well as captured war trophies dating back to World War II.

Since this facility is also the home of the Russian Scientific Research Institute for Armored Vehicle Technology (NIIBT), most of the attention directed at Kubinka focused on former Soviet and Russian armored vehicles. In recent years, however, the focus of attention broadened when it was revealed that Kubinka also includes a massive collection of foreign armor, a collection described by Russian sources as the "biggest in the world," totaling 290 vehicles. This collection includes several modern U.S. MBTs like the M46, M48, and M60. We have also begun to learn how these U.S. vehicles came into Russian hands during the Cold War.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the armored vehicle collection housed and maintained at Kubinka's Military Historical Museum of Armored Vehicles and Weaponry (officially established in 1972), was first revealed to the public. Since then, the museum has gradually become more accessible to Russian citizens and visiting foreigners. The armored vehicle collection is primarily housed in nine large buildings or sheds that resemble open-bay maintenance facilities, without the large bay doors. Each building contains approximately 30 well-maintained vehicles parked side-by-side. The building contents or "themes" in most cases have been confirmed by western visitors and are as follows: Building 1 houses Soviet/Russian heavy tanks. Building 2 contains Soviet/Russian medium tanks and

Building 3 Soviet/Russian light tanks. A fourth building is devoted to Soviet/Russian armored cars. Buildings 5, 6, and 7 house foreign armor, including a collection of German armored vehicles, circa 1941-1945 in Building 5, and other foreign armored vehicles in the remaining two buildings.

Building No. 8, on the other hand, is more mysterious and some sources report that it is still not open to visitors. But Building No. 9, also closed to foreigners for many years, has just recently been explored and includes a variety of rarely seen Soviet/Russian armored vehicles. Interestingly enough, Building 9 is much less well maintained than the other buildings and clearly hasn't been intended for foreign visitors. A few of the relatively modern vehicles in this building include: the Object 219A T-80 tank variant, which was standardized as the rarely seen T-80A Main Battle Tank (MBT), the Object 219RD early diesel-powered T-80B MBT prototype, and the Zhalo-S ("Sting-S") tank destroyer prototype based on the BTR-70 Armored Personnel Carrier (APC).

Since information regarding the museum's collection of armored vehicles first started to reach the west, its comprehensive representation of Soviet/Russian tank development has received the most attention. Among the armored vehicles from 13 different foreign countries, the most impressive is the complete collection of German armored vehicles from World War II, unique in that it includes the sole surviving German Maus heavy tank. The story explaining how the massive Maus found its way to the museum at Kubinka is still unconfirmed. Reportedly, the two working prototypes of the Maus at the German Kummersdorf testing facility were destroyed by German forces near

the end of World War II to prevent them from being captured by the advancing Russian Army. According to the available information, the Russians managed to combine the two damaged prototypes, along with parts of six other partially-completed vehicles, to build the Maus currently on display at Kubinka.

Unlike the German armored vehicles from World War II, many other foreign vehicles in the Kubinka collection are rarely photographed and have only been seen by visitors. This lack of photographic evidence has historically been characteristic of the U.S. armored vehicles at Kubinka. While the museum currently includes 21 U.S. vehicles, the post-World War II U.S. tanks have been virtually unseen in the west until now. The photographs of the U.S. M46 Patton Medium Tank, M48A3 Patton MBT, M60A1 MBT, and the Israeli Magach 4 MBT (a modified U.S. M48A3) are very rare and have been used here with permission. Although very limited, the available information regarding each of these tanks and how they eventually found their way to Kubinka is included below.

The U.S. **M46 Patton Medium Tank** was presented to the former Soviet Union by the North Korean government in 1953. Reportedly, there were originally two M46s provided, with one being destroyed in live-fire testing. Interestingly enough, until very recently the foreign tanks maintained at the museum were all painted dark green. After many years, an effort was made by the museum staff to portray these vehicles more realistically. One of the results of this effort is the very colorful M46 currently on display. During the Korean War, a UN offensive called Operation "Ripper" was launched in March 1951. This marked the first use of the unusual



U.S. M60A1



U.S. M48A2



U.S. M46

Photos by Roman Bazalevsky

“cat” or “tiger” paint scheme that appeared through the remainder of the Korean War. According to intelligence reports at the time, the Chinese were superstitious of tigers. In an attempt to take advantage of this, several U.S. armored units painted large cat faces on their tanks. These paint-jobs were complete with exposed teeth and claws. In some cases, entire tanks were painted with tiger stripes. While this interesting example of psychological warfare may have actually had more of an impact on the morale of the U.S. crews manning the tanks than it did on the Chinese, it did inspire the Kubinka museum staff to display their M46 with fangs. The paint job added to the M46 at Kubinka is very similar to that used on the M46s belonging to the 6th Tank Battalion, 24th Infantry Division during the Korean War. The U.S. **M48A3 Patton MBT**, provided by the Vietnamese government either during or after the Vietnam War, is also painted with a large animal mouth with exposed teeth on the tank’s glacis.

The U.S. **M60A1 MBT** at Kubinka was hand-delivered to the Soviets by an Iranian defector. Reportedly, Iran originally acquired over 400 M60A1s before the fall of the Shah in 1979. The Soviets were, however, well aware of the M60A1 and its capabilities before its arrival in the Soviet Union. In fact, the M60A1’s 105mm main gun and very effective armor protection were already considered a big problem for the Soviet Ground Forces at the time. The acquisition of the M60A1, however, did provide the Soviets their first opportunity to examine the tank close-up. While the available information continues to support Iran as the source for the single M60A1 on display at Kubinka, there are other unconfirmed reports that another M60A1 was supplied to the Soviets from Syria in 1983. This tank was apparently damaged in combat in 1982 and was delivered in poor condition. Additionally, there are re-

ports that live-fire testing was conducted at Kubinka in 1983 involving an M60A1 and captured Israeli M111 105-mm ammunition. Reportedly, the exceptional performance of the M60A1’s gun and the Israeli ammunition surprised and impressed the Soviets enough to add additional glacis armor to many of their own tanks.

The Israeli **Magach 4 MBT** (also known as the “Patton 105”) on display at Kubinka started life as a U.S. M48A3 that was upgraded in Israel. These M48A3s were fitted with the 105mm main gun, a 750 hp diesel engine, and a new low-profile commander’s cupola. The Magach 4 was considered the backbone of the Israeli armored forces in the War of Attrition, the Yom Kippur War, and the Peace for Galilee Operation. The Kubinka Museum’s Magach 4 was provided by the Syrian government in 1982/1983. This Magach 4 is also fitted with Israeli “Blazer” Explosive Reactive Armor (ERA) that the Israelis first used in 1982. While certainly decommissioned for safety purposes in the museum, the displayed tank provides a good example of the extensive array of ERA “bricks” fitted to the tank for combat operations.

The confirmed existence of this particular Magach 4 at Kubinka is important for another reason as well. During the Peace for Galilee Operation in 1982, a Magach 4 was captured by Syrian forces during the battle of Sultan Yacoub. On June 11, 1982, at the end of hostilities, a “victory parade” was held in Damascus, Syria, that included a captured Israeli Magach 4 flying Syrian and Palestinian flags. Several sources reported that the tank’s Israeli crew was also on display during the parade. Three of these crewmen are now listed as MIA by the Israeli government. According to the International Coalition for Missing Israeli Soldiers (ICMIS), there is reason to believe that

this captured tank and the Magach 4 at Kubinka are one in the same. In January 2001, the ICMIS asked Israeli officials to request that an upcoming trip by the Israeli President to Russia include an examination of the Magach 4 at the museum. Reportedly, the Israeli tank (with turret serial number 94866 and hull serial number 817581) arrived at Kubinka still containing human remains, personal belongings, and documents belonging to the tank’s crew.

Over the years, there have been a small number of people in the west who were aware of Kubinka and the potential intelligence bonanza it represented. Recent events around the world and in Russia have led to the gradual lifting of some of the secrecy surrounding the facility and the museum. For those who have studied the available information and for those lucky enough to visit the museum, one thing is clear: this first look at these U.S. tanks displayed at Kubinka is just the beginning. Only time will tell what other secrets Kubinka continues to keep behind closed doors.

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